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ABSTRACT

This study of the influence of social context on children's learning investigated the functions of literacy-based verbal exchanges of 37 preschoolers in a print-enriched play environment. Play settings in two preschool classrooms were enriched with print materials and literacy-related props. Four play settings were created: post office, library, office, and kitchen. Literacy props, such as stamps and recipe cards, were added to the play settings on the basis of appropriateness, authenticity, and utility. Children's play behavior was recorded by means of extensive observations over a 2-month period. A total of 67 literacy-related conversational episodes were isolated and analyzed. The three types of discourse about literacy identified were those used for: (1) designating the names of literacy-related objects, pictures, or texts; (2) negotiating meaning related to literacy topics or routines, such as mailing a letter; and (3) coaching another child in some literacy task, such as spelling words or forming letters, in order to achieve a goal in play. It is concluded that provision of literacy tools and authentic literacy contexts in play inducts children into the culture of literacy, where they may ultimately adopt the discourse patterns, ways of knowing, and cultural practices of the literate community. A total of 42 references are cited. (RH)

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Peers as Literacy Informants:

A Description of Young Children's Literacy Conversations in Play

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Abstract

From an interactionist perspective children's learning is influenced by the social context, through their collaboration with adults and more capable peers as well as their interaction with cultural developed 'tools.' To examine these influences, this study reports on the functions of preschoolers' literacy-based verbal exchanges in a print-enriched play environment. Play settings in two preschool classrooms were reorganized and enriched with print materials and literacy-related props. Children's play behavior was recorded through extensive observations over a two-month period. From these data, 67 literacy-related conversational episodes were isolated and systematically content analyzed. Three types of discourse about literacy were identified in the play context: children's conversations focused on designating the names of literacy-related objects; on negotiating meaning related to a literacy topic; and on coaching another child in some literacy task in order to achieve a goal in play. Results suggest that children's collaborative engagement in literacy through play may have an important influence in their developing understanding of written language.

Peers as literacy informants:

A Description of preschoolers' literacy conversations in play

At the very core of an interactionist view of human development, is the belief that cognitive development cannot be adequately understood by a study of the individual alone. Rather, higher-order cognitive functions develop out of social interaction (Bruner, 1966, 1984; Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vygotsky, 1962; 1978). As Vygotsky (1978) argued, the social context is instrumental in guiding cognitive development both through culturally developed tools as well as through social interaction with more experienced members of society. From this perspective, then, cognitive development is shaped by the social milieu as well as by individual capacity. Growth occurs in the "zone of proximal development"--that phase in development where a child has only partially mastered a skill, but can successfully employ it "under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." (p. 86).

As a result of the interactionist perspective, a great deal of attention has been drawn to the role of the adult or teacher in monitoring the child's current level of skill and providing "scaffolds" to extend these skills to a higher level of ability (Heath, 1983; Ninio & Bruner, 1978; Sigel & McGillicuddy-Delisi, 1984; Snow & Goldfield, 1982). Ninio and Bruner, for example, describe how in the book reading event, a mother tailors her participation to the child's apparent competence. As the child's

capabilities increases, the mother seems to unconsciously "up the ante", avoiding pressing too hard, but engaging her child in more difficult tasks. In these play-like book reading games are said to be the roots of higher level functioning.

Less attention has been paid, however, to the potential contribution of social interactions among the children themselves. Very little is known about how children teach each other or whether they intentionally set out to impart information or "scaffold" a peer's performance on a task (Garvey, 1984). Research on peer tutoring (Cazden, John & Hymes 1972; Cooper, Ayers-Lopez & Marquis; 1982; Gumperz & Herasimchuk, 1975; Johnson & Johnson, 1975; Topping, 1987) suggests that in a formal classroom environment, child teachers help to inform and correct their younger tutees' work, albeit inconsistently, in a similar style as their teacher. In less formal, collaborative classroom settings, however, children's behaviors may not resemble these more formal role models.

Yet ethnographic data collected from the Hawaiian KEEP program, suggests that a good deal of learning may actually occur through informal peer interactions in the classroom. Jordan, D'Amato and Joesting (1981) found that in group related tasks in kindergarten, one "individual child involvement" in a teaching/learning interaction occurred for each three minutes of observation and about half of these had academic content. In first grade, one such interaction was found for every two and half minutes, with about two-thirds being related to academic

matters. These data suggest that peer relations may have considerable influence in teaching/learning contexts, particularly due to the limited number of adult-child interactions in typical classroom settings.

This study examines the nature of children's talk in a preschool environment that has been literacy-enriched to facilitate informal interactions with print through play. Though a wide variety of studies have investigated the relations between play and accompanying uses of language (Corsaro, 1979; Garvey, 1977; Nicholich, 1977; Pellegrini, Galda, Desden & Cox, 1990; Rubin, Fein & Vandenberg, 1983; Sachs, Goldman & Chaille, 1984), this particular research focused specifically on the functions of preschoolers' discourse in learning about literacy. As part of a larger study, this work was designed to analyze how young children may attempt to guide and assist each other in learning about literacy through their collaborative play activities. Our guiding thesis was that these informal exchanges, though certainly not a substitute for adult-child interaction, may function as scaffolding situations that allow the child to extend skills and knowledge of literacy to a higher level of competence.

Method

Subjects and Setting

Thirty-seven children, ages 4 and 5 (25 boys; 12 girls), from two urban preschool classes (N=20; N=17), participated in the study. The preschool served families from diverse ethnic backgrounds (83% Caucasian, 15% Black, 2% Asian), and socio-

economic status levels. Both classrooms were in close proximity to each other, were similar in spatial arrangement, and included the traditional play areas: housekeeping, blocks, small manipulatives, book and art corners. Few print materials, aside from books in the book corner, were included in these areas in either classroom. In general, the teachers provided a traditional, half-day preschool program, including circle time, units or themes on specific topics and daily 40-50 minute "free play" periods. The teachers rarely interacted directly with the children during free play, except to settle disputes or restore order.

The Intervention Design

To provide ample opportunities for children's interactions, these two classrooms were enriched with printed materials and literacy tools, including pencils, markers, assorted stationery and other related items. Essentially, the literacy-enrichment involved two major steps: reorganizing the play space, and inserting literacy props in play centers (see Neuman & Roskos, in press-a, for complete description).

Play spaces were reorganized by dramatically carving areas from one another using semi-fixed features, including cupboards, screens, tables, written signs and hanging mobiles. Four play settings were created: the post office, library, office and kitchen. Labelling was used extensively throughout these settings as a reference tool for materials, toys and information. For example, small manipulatives were sorted and categorized

using printed labels with pictures. Directions for routine activities were displayed using labels, arrows and rebus pictures. These settings, resembling familiar activities, were developed to enable children to use written language for their own purposes.

Having organized the play space, literacy props were inserted that might naturally be associated with these environments. Drawn from our earlier work, specific props were determined by three criteria: appropriateness (observed use by young children), authenticity (a real item in the general environment), and utility (usefulness to children in their imitative literacy attempts). For example, the kitchen center included recipe cards, coupons, and cookbooks. Props in the post office center included a mail box, envelopes, paper, stamps, and stamp pads. This "scattering" of print throughout the play environments was designed to more closely resemble the nature of environmental print in the outside world. Thus, through this literacy-enriched environment, we attempted to provide children with the "culturally-developed tools" (Vygotsky, 1978) necessary to extend their current skills and knowledge of literacy through social interaction.

Procedure

Prior to the intervention phase of the study, two measures of literacy behavior in play were obtained over a two-week period. First, using an observational procedure developed by Singer and Singer (1980), each child's actions and language

(verbatim) were recorded during their spontaneous free play time for a 10-minute period on four separate occasions by two trained observers. A total of 40 minutes of observation was recorded for each child, yielding 148 play protocols. Second, play activity in four different areas (housekeeping, book corner, art table, manipulatives/board games) was videotaped for 30 minutes, four different times, for a total of 2 hours per play area.

Following these procedures, the physical play environments of each classroom were enriched during nonschool hours with literacy-related materials. Over the next four-week period, no formal observation occurred as children became accustomed to these design changes. Then, using the same observational and videotaping procedures, children's play was systematically observed once again.

Analysis

Play protocols were analyzed for evidence of literacy demonstrations, defined as instances of reading or writing-like behaviors. Such examples included scribbling, marking on paper, pretending to read, book-handling, or attending to print in some manner. These data, presented in a separate report, indicated that the number of literacy demonstrations rose sharply from an average of 1.5 to over 2.8 demonstrations per 40 minutes (Neuman & Roskos, in press-b). These results demonstrated that, provided the "tools", children freely engaged in self-sponsored literacy activities through play.

The present report, however, focuses in greater detail on

the sustained interactions recorded during the pre-and post-intervention videotaped play activities. Play frames--play bound by a location and a particular focus or interaction (Bateson, 1955; Sutton-Smith, 1979)--were established and 34 literacy frames were isolated for further analysis. Of these frames, 12 included extended interactions between children that focused specifically on literacy.

Literacy conversations were defined as exchanges involving reading- and writing-like activities and behaviors. Examples include pretending to read stories to each other, using writing together for some purpose like mailing letters, or interpreting literacy-related roles as in post officers, and librarians. Each conversation focused on a specific purpose, such as to teach, to discover letter names, or to establish shared meanings of literacy-related objects.

Following successive viewings, conversational boundaries of verbal exchanges within these play frames were established. Verbal exchanges were defined as two linked "turns-at-speaking," a basic unit for analyzing talk. Two or more of these exchanges comprised an episode, characterized by a thematic continuity or organization (Garvey, 1984). Based on this analytic scheme, 67 conversational episodes were located and then transcribed verbatim.

The next analysis involved a search for patterns among these conversational episodes. Data were massed and scanned through systematic content analysis (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Patterns

of instructional discourse were established by listing how certain conversational episodes were alike and how they differed systematically from those outside the category. In this manner core properties were then used to develop a definition of each type of discourse. In this phase, we analyzed particular functions of the "literacy talk," then independently checked the consistency of these patterns across different play contexts, activities and participants. Three kinds of discourse about literacy were identified in the play context: children's conversations focused on designating the names of literacy-related objects; on negotiating meaning related to a literacy topic; and on coaching another child in some literacy task in order to achieve a goal in play.

The following analysis describes and details the basic patterns of "instructional" conversations observed in children's literacy-related talk in the course of their play activities.

PRESCHOOLERS' LITERACY-RELATED INSTRUCTIONAL CONVERSATIONS IN PLAY

Preschoolers literacy discourse was defined by several important characteristics. First, children's "literacy talk" was situated, deriving its meaning from the context of the ongoing play event. For example, when writing letters in the post office center, Dana reminds Hilary of the literacy routine in ending a letter, "we hafta sign our names." In this respect, as noted by Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz (1976), the context became a part of the

conversation itself, assisting in the construction of a sequence of talk.

Second, literacy talk was always accompanied by active engagement in the event itself. Children did not simply describe how to do a literacy-related activity to their friend. Rather, they would show them, talking about the literacy event at the same time. For example, in attempting to teach Alex how to spell "safe," Scott says "first you put an "s" while at the same time, he writes the letter for Alex on his paper. In short, children's literacy-related talk, as with other conversational attempts reported by Cook-Gumperz and Corsaro (1977), was intimately tied to action, with meaning carried as much linguistically as by gesture and bodily movement.

Third, unlike adult-child relationships, children often reversed the role of more capable peer according to the purpose of the play. Sometimes a child teacher might assume the role of guiding and correcting, while the other child went about performing a literacy task; at other times, however, these roles would reverse, with the "teacher" initiating a bid for assistance. Due to the children's varying experiences in literacy, the actual definition of what constituted the "more capable peer", then, changed according to the particular literacy demands and routines required in the play experience.

In brief, the children's literacy conversations included not only linguistic phenomena, but also a full range of bodily movement embedded in the social-physical play setting, thus

requiring an examination of the child's "whole behavior at the moment" during conversational episodes (Vygotsky, 1967). Through their instructional conversations, preschoolers used the literacy contexts and "tools" in the enriched play setting to convey their interpretations of the functions and features of written language and attempted to extend their knowledge with help from their peers. These instructional conversations occurred in rather consistent patterns, as noted in the following categories.

Designating

This category consists of the variety of ways in which preschoolers attempted to name or to discover the names of literacy-related objects, pictures or text. The basic pattern of communication is illustrated in Figure 1. One child appears to initiate the conversation by inquiring about a picture, a word, or a section of text. The other provides an interpretation which is then either verified or corrected by the inquirer.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Some of the 25 designating conversations occurred in the library where children spent time looking at books together. In this book-reading situation, children's interactions showed some similarities to Ninio and Bruner's description of mother-child utterances (1978). As with a mother, one child attempted to evoke another's attention, by the word "look," followed by a query, usually in the form of a initial guess. However, in the

case of these peer interactions, the mother's role of providing feedback and labeling was shared by the other child, as in the following example:

> Alex and Scott are leaning over a table and looking at dinosaur books together.
> Alex: Look! This is a dinosaur, right?, ..so is this right?
> Scott: (looking at his friend's book) That isn't a pterodactyl. It doesn't have wings.
> Alex: Yeah, it's a duck.
> Scott: No, it isn't. It's a dinosaur but I don't know its name.
> Alex: Yeah, it's a dinosaur. (Finishes and takes another book). I readin' another one. I wanna learn more about dinosaurs.

In the play settings of kitchen and office, designating conversations tended to be more goal-oriented. These exchanges were often brief and highly gestural, giving the inquirer certain necessary information needed to continue on with the play experience.

> Zachery and Kent are playing in the office. They are sitting at a desk. They have helped another boy find his birthday on a small calendar, July 25. Zack now wants to find the date on his own calender.
> Zack (flipping through a desk calendar): Where's July 25?
> Kent (pointing): Here's June 25.
> Zack: Not June 25. Don't be silly. Where's July 25? Where's July 25. Where is it? (He flips furiously through the calendar).
> Kent (pointing repeatedly): No... wait a minute. Here it is.
> Zack: Ok, we've got it. Kent, now you hafta send out invitations for July 25th to many people!

As noted above, the function of the designating conversation was clearly to assign a particular label to an object or words. Central to the conversation is the literacy prop--the calendar. In this case, Zack's play was disrupted until he was able to acquire the information needed with the calendar serving as a key

resource. The actual information was provided through talk punctuated by numerous gestures which served to convey meaning about the particular birth day.

In general then, due to their intense functionality, designating conversations often occurred as "short-hand" inserts between children, within the ongoing context of the play flow. The verbal exchanges were succinct, conveyed almost as much by gesture as by talk. As noted in Table 1, children's exchanges served to designate pictures, words, alphabet letters, as well as identify other print features like punctuation during play.

Insert Table 1 about here

The steady presence of literacy props within the play environment invited exploration and conversation. As cultural tools they provided concrete "landmarks" which both incited and guided young children's literacy-based actions and conversations, thus facilitating their attempts to construct meaning with print.

Negotiating

Negotiating conversations served to establish agreement between two players on the meaning of a literacy-related object or routine. Whereas designating exchanges focused on the identification of objects, negotiating involved the interpretation of their meaning. These conversations, therefore, were usually longer than those that merely labeled, as children worked out the meaning of an activity together.

Figure 2 describes the basic negotiating sequence. Here, one child calls attention to a literacy-related activity, the other interprets the child's focus, and the exchange continues as they attempt to reach consensus. Unlike mother-child talk, however, in many of the exchanges, consensus is never reached. Instead, the conversation ends abruptly or is refocused in new directions.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Many of the 29 negotiating conversations focused on the interpretation of literacy-related roles, as in the following example:

> Aaron, Ari and John are in the Library center. Aaron is shuffling papers. Ari is flipping through a book.
> Ari (to John): Where's the book? We need the book returned today!
> John: I have til the library closes, don't I?
> Ari: Did you look through it yet?
> Aaron: The contract is broken because the person forgot to bring the book back. (He rips the "library" card in half.) (To John): Look! Your contract is broke for bringing your book late, for not bringing it back.
> John: Wait a minute! I gotta take care of my sick kid. I'll bring it back before the day is over.. alright..I'll be in 10 minutes.
> Aaron: The library is closed for 10 minutes.

In this sequence, the play was influenced by the cultural repertoires of "library" that children brought to the activity. Aaron and Ari engaged John in the play by creating and presenting a problem that served to scaffold the conversation. John was encouraged to use and to elaborate his language related to his "library" schema in dealing with the rather intractable

"librarian," whose rules must be strictly enforced.

Thus the conversation provided a forum for sharing and interpreting ideas related to the librarian's role. The presence of authentic props within a library play setting seemed to assist the conversation and to facilitate negotiations within it. For example, the dramatic ripping of the library card conveyed Aaron's notions of the librarian's power as well as his attempts to further the play experience within the library context. In one sense, the library card (the prop) became a tool inciting action through language, once again highlighting the intimacy of physical location, action, and talk in young children's development of meaning-making through language (Vygotsky, 1978).

Closely related to exchanges about roles were children's negotiating conversations of common literacy routines. Another library conversation provides an example:

> Scott, David and Aaron are in the Library Play Center.
> David (to Aaron): Wanna buy a book?
> Scott (to David): This is a library. They don't buy 'em. They rent 'em.
> Aaron: Could I rent this book please?
> Scott: Do you have a library card?
> David: (to Aaron) No, this book is not for sale anymore.
> Aaron: Are these for sale?
> Scott: (A bit frustrated) No..you don't buy 'em. You borrow 'em.
> David: This is a good book.
> Aaron: All right.
> David: (He writes on a piece of paper as if recording the withdrawal.) You've got four days.
> Aaron: 'kay. (leaves to see other friends). Hey! I bought...I borrowed this scary book for four days!

In this conversation we observed two interpretations of the common literacy routine, of "book check-out in a library." David

refers to it as "buying" the books and Scott uses the more appropriate term of "borrowing." Aaron's last comment suggests that he might have internalized the concept of "borrowing," rather than "buying," through these social interactional processes. In this case, the more experienced partner, Scott, continued to correct his peers as they pretended to play library. Such support seemed to enable the three collaborators to come to a joint consensus of how a library might function.

As in other verbal exchanges, the active manipulation of props precipitates and furthers the conversational efforts. The intersection of literacy props and talk in the situation appears to have facilitated what Rowe describes as the "building of shared meanings and the presentation of challenges to participants' existing meanings" (1989, p. 345). Consequently, the play, itself, becomes a literacy event and a context for literacy learning.

As noted in Table 1, our analysis indicated that the bulk of these negotiating conversations focused on literacy-related roles and routines. In addition, preschoolers' conversations also related to interpreting literacy competencies and processes, as well as interpreting pictures and text.

Thus, through these negotiating conversations, children's experiences in literacy routines were supplemented and elaborated by the presence of their peers. Together, they created a shared body of information which served as an interactional resource in sustaining the play itself, and in learning more about how

literacy "tools" work. Evidence of such discourse among children during play supports Jacob's (1984) earlier contention that children learn important social behaviors (actions and language) associated with specific uses of literacy through their play experiences.

Coaching

Conversations in this category consisted of attempts by one child to help another overcome some type of literacy-related obstacle or interference in play; the goals usually involved spelling words, forming letters and demonstrating literacy routines. For example, in attempting to write a newspaper, David requests the spelling of a title from his friend Adam, then runs off, saying "newspapers for sale!"

In this pattern as noted in Figure 3, typically a child asks or expresses a need for help in some manner. The other responds by providing verbal suggestions and, in many cases, actually demonstrating the procedure. Once demonstrated, the requestor might then practice the activity, with the "teacher" providing reinforcement of the literacy behavior.

Insert Figure 3 about here

While there was mutual participation in coaching episodes, it was clear that one child was designated the teacher, and the other, the learner. In this playful context, however, interactional roles changed quickly, resembling a reciprocal

model of peer assistance, as observed in elementary classrooms (Forman & Cazden, 1985). The following episode is a typical example:

> Brian and Dana are in the office play center writing on paper.
> Brian: How do you spell your name?
> Dana: D-A-N-A
> Brian: (writes as she dictates) Dana. (He runs his pencil under the word). Is that how you spell your name?
> Dana: (looking at her paper) Yup! Now, how do I spell your name?
> Brian: B-R-I-A-N. (Dana writes as he dictates). (looking at her paper). I didn't say E. (He looks at her B). Go like this...like that. (He is tracing a B for her.) OK?
> Dana: (She nods and writes).
> Brian: (Looks at her paper) Yup! That's right.

In this example, Brian's teaching corresponds to that of a facilitating adult, simplifying the task by means of graduated assistance (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) so that Dana could succeed.

However, these preschoolers did not always demonstrate such subtlety in their teaching. In some cases, children's attempt to model or intervene led to their taking over or actually performing the literacy behavior for the other child, as in the following example:

> Michael and Brian are in the office playing with the computer.
> Brian: How do you work the computer?
> Michael: Let me show you. (He places a piece of paper in the computer and punches the keys). See this is how you do it.
> Brian: Let me try
> Michael: See, that's how you make your name, with a "b" and an "n." (not letting Brian touch the keyboard).
> Brian: I'm not doing what you tell me to do.

As this example demonstrates, peer coaching represented a fine art. Unlike a parent or teacher tailoring his/her

assistance on the basis of a child's apparent competence, our child teachers seemed at times to press too hard, causing confrontations, or an end to the play itself. Of the 13 coaching episodes observed, we found that preschoolers' were most effective when they modelled or participated with their peers, rather than when they intervened or performed for them.

Unlike the other patterns of instructional conversations, these exchanges demanded a finer coordination of talk and action, as one child attempted to respond to another's needs. Perhaps this need to model specific behaviors keyed to a peer's reading and writing attempts accounts for the fact that coaching conversations were less frequent and less successful for these children. We propose that these conversations may represent a more developed form of instructional discourse indicative of metalinguistic awareness as described by Rowe (in press).

Conclusions

The interactionist perspective argues that child development proceeds as an unfolding, fostered through the dynamic influences of the child with his/her social environment. Learning is mediated through the provision of tools and practices, and through social interaction with more experienced members of society.

In our study, we attempted to create a literacy environment by providing preschoolers with the cultural artifacts or tools of written language encountered outside of school. These tools were placed in life-like settings to authenticate the common demands

and routines that reading and writing activities serve in daily life. Our efforts were designed to encourage our community of learners to acquire, use and extend their knowledge of literacy through social interaction.

The results of our study suggest that children in this enriched environment can and do provide substantive input to one another's literacy learning. Through designating and labeling written objects, negotiating their meaning and coaching or assisting techniques, preschoolers convey a great deal of information about literacy. These instructional conversations, however, are embedded, sometimes almost imperceptibly, in the flow of their ongoing play. In this respect, educators may be overlooking the benefits that such an informal learning environment can provide for children.

The print-enriched play environment appeared to provide special opportunities for preschoolers' interaction. Here, they were able to engage in authentic literacy activities, to become situated in "communities of practice" (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989), to reverse roles between expert and learner, to give directions as well as follow them, to ask questions as well as answer them with their peers. The availability of literacy props in explicit, real-life literacy contexts seemed to enable the children to go beyond their existing skills through their attempts to create and solve problems together. These findings support those of studies of peer assistance (Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988), suggesting the important contribution

of social interactions among the children themselves.

This form of assistance, however, is a far cry from the gradual and carefully tailored verbal exchanges characteristic of adult-child relationships in the "zone of proximal development." Bruner's hand-over principle (1983), for example, describes how the adult carefully adjusts the level of responsibility, steadily moving from the child being a spectator, to that of a participant.

Examples from our conversational episodes, indicate that the literacy talk more accurately approximates a collaborative learning model. In the play setting, neither partners were consistently more capable. Rather, partners served complementary social roles, assisting each other in a manner that could certainly be defined as scaffolding at times, but at other times, conflict resolution. In fact, conversations often appeared to induce cognitive conflict, which Piaget (1962) has argued ultimately results in cognitive restructuring and growth and which Pellegrini (1985) has proposed is the potent variable in play affecting children's literacy development. Thus, the results suggest that while certainly not a substitute for adult-child interactions, peer conversations, even at the preschool level, can function as an important intermediate context for literacy learning. Indeed, providing opportunities for peer informal exchanges may be especially important in school classrooms with children of varying experiences in literacy, and with the limits of adult-child interactions in these

institutional settings. For example, it was not uncommon for the children in our study to turn to other children to resolve questions in literacy-related tasks when adults were not in sight.

This research underscores findings from studies indicating the important uses of language as a tool by children to accompany action in the social play context (Corsaro, 1979; Nicholich, 1977; Pellegrini, 1984; Wolf & Pusch, 1985). Literacy-based verbal exchanges in these settings were purposeful, meaningful, and related to stimulus props and events. In this respect, this research adds an important dimension to the increasing body of literature examining the effects of play discourse on the development of literate behavior. Not only may certain surface features of the play text be associated with those of literate texts (Pellegrini, Galda, Dresden & Cox, 1990), but the very nature of the collaborative engagement in play may influence literacy development.

In sum, the results of our analysis argue for an increased awareness of the impact of informal conversations on children's understanding of written language. Providing literacy "tools" and authentic literacy contexts in play inducts children into the culture of literacy, where they may ultimately adopt the discourse patterns, ways of knowing and cultural practices of the literate community.

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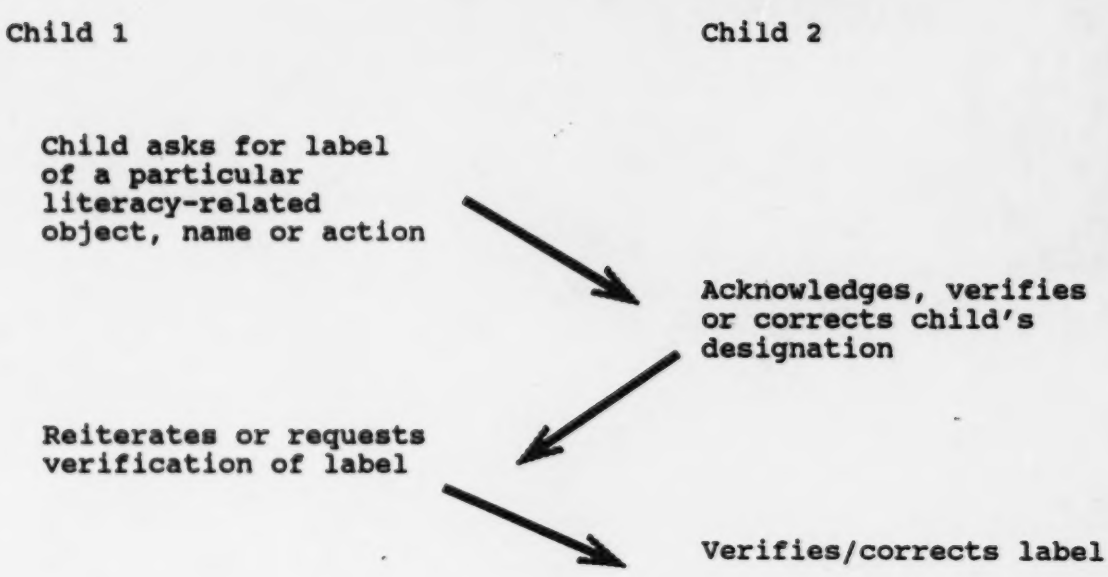
Figure 1. Basic Designating Sequence

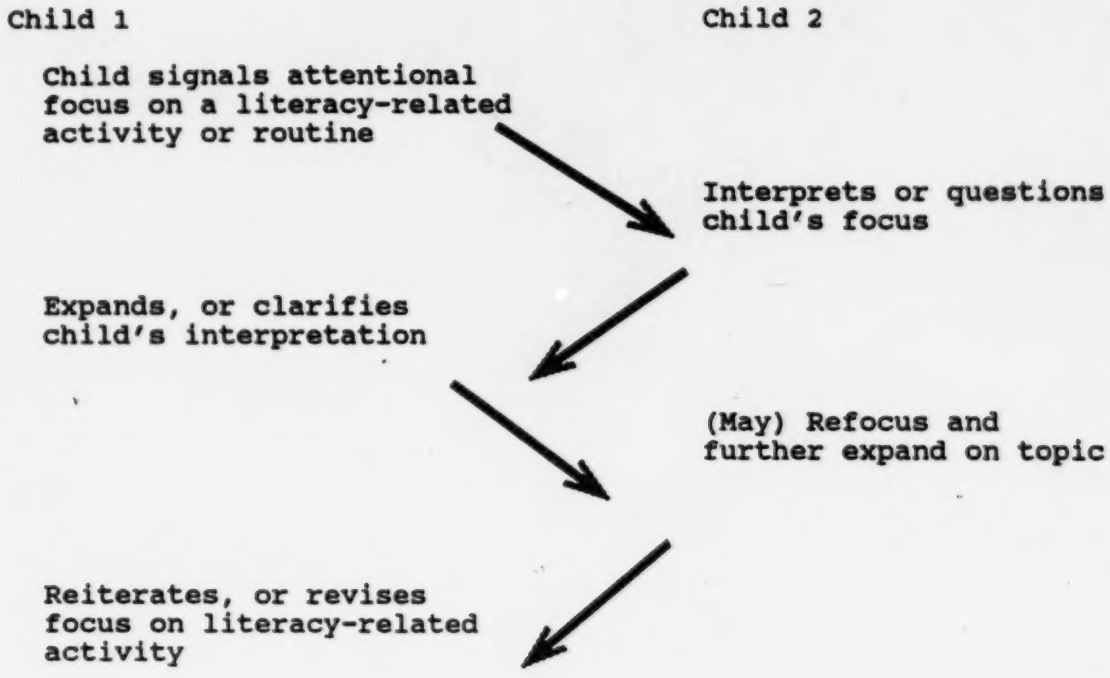
Figure 2. Basic Negotiating Sequence

Figure 3. Basic Coaching Sequence

Basic Designating Sequence


Child 1
Child 2
Child asks for label of a particular literacy-related object, name or action
Acknowledges, verifies or corrects child's designation
Reiterates or requests verification of label
Verifies/corrects label

Basic Negotiating Sequence


Child 1
Child 2
Child signals attentional focus on a literacy-related activity or routine
Interprets or questions child's focus
Expands, or clarifies child's interpretation
(May) Refocus and further expand on topic
Reiterates, or revises focus on literacy-related activity

Basic Coaching Sequence

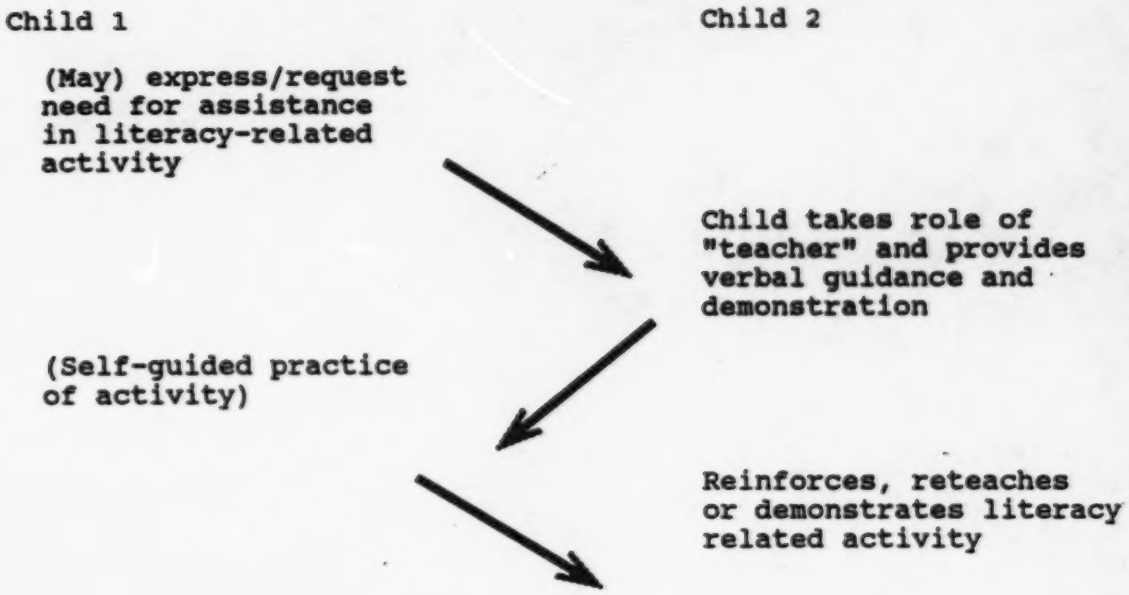

Child 1
Child 2
(May) express/request need for assistance in literacy-related activity
Child takes role of "teacher" and provides verbal guidance and demonstration
(Self-guided practice of activity)
Reinforces, reteaches or demonstrates literacy related activity

Table 1

Types of Instructional Conversations

Type	Number of Episodes
Designating: To label a literacy-related object	
Labeling pictures	14
Designating print features	11
Negotiating: To establish shared meaning	
Literacy-related roles (i.e. post officer)	12
Literacy routines (i.e. mailing a letter)	11
Reading/writing processes and competencies	6
Coaching: To teach or guide in learning	
Learning about letters	5
Learning words	5
Learning literacy routines	3
Total	67